

Past the Impasse, The (New) Material Feminisms

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1). Introduction

Anglo-American feminism has long been at an unproductive impasse, too readily incorporated into antifeminist narratives. The root of the problem lies in theoretical disagreements about the nature of embodied sex/gender differences, especially as they are represented as irreconcilable, polarized positions. This essentialist versus constructionist debate was heightened by the “linguistic turn” in academia of the late 80s/early 90s, which favoured the social constructionist perspective.

This paper examines the new material feminisms as comprising “a post-constructionist turn” in Anglo-American feminist theory (and beyond). In specific, I explore post-constructionism in its methodological aspects, arguing that it helps resolve the complicated and difficult *feminism – postmodernism* relationship as one particular manifestation of the longstanding *essentialist – constructionist* impasse in feminist thought with significant spatial and temporal aspects.

The new material feminisms may be seen as the latest articulation of the biology / society (or sex/gender) dualism in feminist theory that underpins the impasse. This complex phenomena cannot be fully handled here, but must be understood as rooted in a history of feminist theory (temporal aspect) and about fundamentally different ideas (conceptual aspect), including between disciplines (for example between feminist technoscience studies and feminist studies of the human sciences), which together constitute different feminist methodologies. It’s about approaches which (are seen to) privilege culture or society on one hand, or biology/nature on the other but there are many manifestations of the debate in feminism as well as academic and popular culture more generally. In feminist theory in particular the division is between a second wave of 1970s feminism that is considered modernist in its approaches (including radical, Marxist and liberal feminisms) and a third wave of 1990s (and beyond) feminism considered postmodernist in its approaches (including psychoanalytic feminisms). The modernist second wavers are taken to be essentialist because of the dominance of the view that women share certain characteristics in common as women, which must be privileged over other identifications, while the postmodernist third wavers are seen as constructionists because of the dominance of the linguistic/discursive or cultural world in their explanations of reality (which leads them to favor difference over commonality). The current dominance of the postmodern or constructionist approach based on the third wave critique of the second wave gets represented as a progressive development in a teleological linear narrative of feminism. These inevitably simplifying categorizations have been critiqued but not, as yet, successfully replaced.¹

¹ For example the debate is arguably characterized by a deeply entrenched conservatism that has taken root in feminist theory, whereby (biological) determinism and (cultural) essentialism are presented as opposed positions leaving us at a stalemate regarding “the woman question” which remains foundational to movements for sex/gender equality however conceived. This presentation of the question of bodies has become rote, drawing on theoretical absolutes which reduce answers to the question, “what is the nature of

The dominance of the discursive approach to gendered reality relates to the “new” feminist backlash in that feminism’s entanglement in the debate, and subsequent political quietude, is presented as evidence of its contemporary irrelevance. In spite of this, in recent years there has been an emergence of interdisciplinary feminist theory that emphasizes materiality as part of a “discontent with the social constructionist orthodoxy.”² These new material feminisms, variously referred to (for example “the new materialism,”³ “new feminist materialisms,”⁴ or simply “material feminisms”⁵) renegotiate the biological essentialist and social constructionist binary, and constitute what has been called the material turn (Ahmed, 2008; Hird, 2003), the ontological turn (Asberg, 2010; McNeil, 2009), or the post constructionist turn (Lykke, 2010a).⁶

A number of vital, groundbreaking material feminist texts from across the disciplines have recently appeared which define the material turn.⁷ Key among them are for example, Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo’s *Material Feminisms*, Gillian Howie’s *Between Feminism and Materialism*, and Michael Hames-Garcia and Paula Moya’s *Reclaiming Identity* (2000), as well as disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept.” But the ideas have vintage, (even if there is no consensus on inclusion) for example in the work of such thinkers as Lynda Birke and Sandra Harding, and feminist technoscience theorists more generally (though

the material world?” to various forms of determinism. Cultural essentialist and biological determinist are placed in opposition, as though they espoused fundamentally different views rather than springing from the same reductionist root. There is little wonder there is an impasse given that the terms of engagement are monolithic rather than presenting alternatives between which negotiation could be forged.

² Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 90.

³ Ahmed, Sara. “Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism.’” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 15:1 (2008): 23-39.

⁴ Iris, van der Tuin. “‘New feminist materialisms’” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 34 (2011) 271 - 277.

⁵ Alaimo and Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*.

⁶ Asberg, Cecilia and Nina Lykke, “Feminist technoscience studies” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 17:4 (2010) 299-305. I like Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s conceptualization of “The various critical turns – from linguistic to material – [as] spatial-temporal metaphors that posit theory as a material phenomenon” as in a skier “navigating a solid surface at a certain speed” (Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, “‘Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept’” *Hypatia* 26:3 (Summer, 2011).

⁷ For a few see Howie, *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*; Lynda Birke and Cecilia Asberg, “Biology is a feminist issue: Interview with Lynda Birke” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 17,4: (2010) 413-423; Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found*; Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Linda Martin Alcoff, “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?” in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, eds. Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia (California: University of California Press, 2000) 312 – 344; Stevi Jackson, “Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible—and Necessary” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 24, 3 / 4 (2001) 283-293; Noela Davis, “New Materialism and Feminism’s Anti-Biologism: A Response to Sara Ahmed” in *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 16, 1 (2009), 67-80; Alexandra Howson *embodying gender* (London: Sage Publishers, 2005). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

not exclusively). In a recent overview of the most recent texts Iris van der Tuin (2011) characterizes the material turn as a multidisciplinary phenomena in Western academia, that “feminist theory is at the cutting edge of... ”⁸

They similarly analyze the effects of a once-radical feminist constructionism that has, arguably, become institutionally entrenched while acknowledging the continuity of thought from across the modern / postmodern spatio-temporal designation. For example Lykke believes that the new materialist feminisms, best described as “post-constructionism,” are indebted to feminist de/constructionism “from Beauvoir to Butler” and that “... very few of the feminist theorists who argue for a rethinking of sex, biology, and embodiment would deny the genealogical kinship with feminist de/constructionism... ”⁹ Significantly, then, this reengagement has the advantage of years of feminist insight about the co-constitutive relationship between representation and reality regarding sex/gender and embodiment, a hallmark of postmodern thought though not exclusive to that approach¹⁰. Interestingly, some key players in the linguistic turn are also important to the material turn, mostly notably Haraway, which demonstrates the emphasis on continuity of thought instead of discontinuity and breakage that is, I argue, a hallmark of this turn.

Because the features of this turn are often characterized as “new” which implies “next” in a chronological succession with a connotation of superceding, replacing, and bettering, it has drawn some feminist ire. I agree that to the extent that they are “post-constructionist” they do follow after postmodern constructionism as a dominant methodological and conceptual fashion in academic feminism. Rather than rehearsing the (academic) debates¹¹ I start from the proposition that there is a coherent body of work emerging from feminist theory that questions the linguistic turn and calls for a critical re-engagement with materiality, i.e. the material body. I agree with Zalewski’s characterization of the problem at hand, when she writes, “... the entrenchment of feminist work in academic institutions has arguably encouraged a stereotypical approach which involves building reputations on the basis of finding fault with the work of others” then adds, there are other ways “of doing feminism.”¹² While there are significant differences between “modernist” 1970s feminisms and “postmodernist” 1990s and contemporary feminisms not to be overlooked, like Zalewski and others, I question whether this emphasis currently serves feminism.

In this paper I employ Nina Lykke’s umbrella term for the diverse and many theories that constitute the material turn. In addition to capturing the common denominator of these many and diverse works as a critique of the limits of constructionism, Lykke defines post-constructionism as a new “thinking technology” (borrowing Haraway’s wording) that I argue best describes its capacity to transcend the

⁸ Van der Tuin, “... “ 271

⁹ Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism”, 132.

¹⁰ See for example, Ahmed, “Imaginary Prohibitions” and Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism.”

¹¹ See Ahmed (2008), Noela Davis (2009) and Iris Van de Tuin (2008) in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*.

¹² Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism: Theorising through practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 141.

feminist constructionist / essentialist impasse because it breaks away from any (temporal and conceptual) limitations associated with the feminist waves model.

The new material feminisms are associated with a “breaking feminist waves”¹³ methodology which circumvents the limitations of linear teleological fixity associated with the waves metaphor. I suggest material feminism can counteract the problem of relying on the trope of unshakable antagonistic differences in feminism presented as third versus second wave feminism, and essentialist versus constructionist views of women’s subject positions (because second wave “modernists” became synonymous with essentialism and third wave “postmodernists” with social constructionism in a popular rendering of the history of feminist theory). Post-constructionist, material feminist theories position themselves to take the best from the history of feminist theory without regard for this well worn divide to address the “material discursive”¹⁴ constitution of bodies and material life. As Lykke aptly describes: “The aim of these endeavours is to theorize bodily and transcorporeal materialities in ways that neither push feminist thought back into the traps of biological determinism or cultural essentialism, nor make feminist theorizing leave bodily matter and biologies ‘behind’ in a critically under-theorized limbo.”¹⁵ A comprehensive discussion of the way they do so is beyond my scope, but the terms “material” and “materialist” refer to their emphasis on physical, embodied existence, and their theoretical and methodological roots in for example, a renewed dialectical materialism and standpoint theory but are not limited to those.

Letting go of the antagonistic trope in feminism enables three significant advances. First, it lets us go deeper “into and beyond”¹⁶ claims that post-structuralist arguments have been detrimental to feminism, and to carry the mantle of trans-dualism (i.e. biology / society, and sex / gender) further. Secondly, it reframes a purposive and politically engaged feminism that moves beyond blame in the academic tradition of bettering one’s forebears (in this case, post-modernist feminists, and before that second wave essentialists), which can mire one in theory to the detriment of activism. This includes stressing continuity and commonality while also plainly stating divergences; and finally, it allows a more generous (re)interpretation of centrally important thinkers and their contributions, and to productively reconcile them with others in the history of feminism with whom they may not otherwise be placed. I offer this paper in recognition of the need to approach feminisms this way, especially by involving *the way texts are received* as part of their overall impact. When it comes to biological determinism (or any other biopolitical argument), Birke claims “...it isn’t only a question of what is argued, but how that argument resonates with the wider culture” a point Butler also makes when reflecting on *Gender Trouble’s* (unintended) watershed feminist anti-essentialist significance¹⁷. Where I do refer to feminist waves, my purpose is not to pit one feminism against another but to make sense of dominant trends (understood both historically and contemporarily) to confront seemingly irreconcilable problems and salvage a more purposive and political feminism.

¹³ A series from Palgrave Macmillan, with a foreword written by Linda M. Alcoff and Gillian Howie.

¹⁴ Donna Haraway in Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008)

¹⁵ Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism,” 131 -132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷ Asberg and Birke, 417. Butler, “Gender as Performance”, 111.

To better understand the material turn, (which is a relativistic conceptual frame), and to show how the new material feminisms work I revisit the postmodern turn in terms of its relationship to feminism, hence the groundbreaking work of Donna Haraway. I don't offer a comprehensive review of recent and emerging work constituting this turn, but reflect on how it most clearly offers fresh thinking in feminist theory and practice. My emphasis is on material feminism as a methodology that critiques, yet acknowledges and draws from postmodernist insights.

2). Feminism Between Modernity and Postmodernity

In the sense that both postmodernism and feminism are critical of the androcentric “underlying principles and beliefs of modernity”¹⁸ they share a political platform. In particular, radical feminism approaches postmodernism in its deconstructionist approach toward Enlightenment underpinnings of patriarchy, including its discursive constructions of “women” (for instance in unattainable beauty standards and pornography) hence can be seen as its precursor in that regard.¹⁹ At the same time, however, because postmodernism's cutting edge doesn't consider the modern roots of feminism off bounds, its radical deconstruction of the concept of “woman” has threatened the traditional foundation of movements for gender liberation. It's because of this complication that so much ink has been spilt coming to grips with what can be created by the merging of these two theoretically complex and internally diverse systems of thought²⁰.

For all their disputes, incongruities, and contradictions – alliances between feminism and postmodernism have been made. Postmodernity is not all “post” or anti-modern, nor is feminism all modern. Feminism is not adequately defined as part of the modern project which postmodernism wishes to deconstruct, at least partly because it also sought to deconstruct Enlightenment modernity's values and traditions. Indeed, it did so before postmodernism.²¹ The “modern” notions of “the subject” and “the body” remain significant for feminist scholars, however, because they remain central for women in general. Some scholars, especially Dorothy Smith, have described feminism's particular orientation as being suspended between modernity and postmodernity, which implies a possible strategic use of the tools of both frameworks. Like some forms of postmodernism, feminism is critical of patriarchy and provides tools for its dismantling, yet it is cautious about postmodernism's indiscriminate deconstructions that potentially

¹⁸ Newman and White, *Women, Politics, and Public Policy*, 45.

¹⁹ See Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism*.

²⁰ For example see Linda J. Nicholson, ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism*, and Newman and White, *Women, Politics, and Public Policy*, 61.

²¹ Susan Bordo, “Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body,” in *Up Against Foucault*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (London: Routledge, 1993), 179-202; M.E. Bailey, “Foucauldian feminism: Contesting bodies, sexuality and identity,” in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (London: Routledge, 1993), 99-122. Also, Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers*.

culminate in a paralyzing relativism, and its tendencies toward neo-determinism based on a socially overdetermined body.²²

Smith's argument that feminism is suspended between modernity and postmodernity refers to the situation that feminism, because of the concept of "woman," is suspended between the *modern subject* and *postmodern subjectivization*.²³ Feminism is internally contradictory because it must find a way to organize and make its claims, but at the same time face obstacles to the claim that any foundation for a cohesive subject is possible. In other words, feminists have been taking account of this postmodern argument about the impossibility of a unified subject even as they have been claiming that the unified subject is "women."²⁴

The most significant consequence of the postmodernism-feminism encounter is the disturbance of any comfortable and uniformly recognized ideas about the subject of feminism. The paralyzing crux of the matter for feminists in the face of postmodernism's challenges is that they can't have it both ways – "[f]eminist theory cannot claim both that knowledge and the self are constituted within history and culture and that feminist theory speaks on behalf of a universalized 'woman.' Rather, it must embrace differences between women and accept a position of partial knowledge(s)."²⁵ This presentation of the feminist dilemma as entwined with the cultural and political face-off between modernity and postmodernity tasks feminism with the impossible choice between its liberatory (modern) roots and assumptions, and a (postmodern) critique of their patriarchal character.²⁶ Lost in this never-ending loop, feminist agency is foreclosed, but is this the only way?

Many feminist theorists have risen to the challenge of reconceiving Cartesian dualism in a variety of ways that validate the various and changeable experiences of women's embodiment by recognizing their experiences as different from each other, not just from men's. In the so-called third wave, they are influenced by postmodern theory to varying degrees. Barbara Arneil claims that the defining feature of a "third wave" of Anglo-Western feminism is a focus on differences among women, and differential embodiment.²⁷ From Beauvoir to Butler, attempts have been made to reconcile biological sex differences and cultural patriarchy in light of a desire for social change and the reality of changing reproductive realities such as that posed by biotechnology. As Tina Chanter aptly notes, because of developments in reproductive technology, theorizing

²² Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Alcoff, 2000.

²³ Also known as the constructionism/essentialism dilemma in feminism.

²⁴ See Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13:3 (1988), 420. See also her comprehensive and detailed history of the debate in Hames-Garcia and Moya 2000.

²⁵ Sue Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," 43. See Also Stone 2000 and Linda J. Nicholson, ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁶ See Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, for a positive assessment of this fundamental feminist conundrum.

²⁷ Arneil, *Politics & Feminism*.

women's bodies has become a complicated affair since "[t]he female body is no longer a stable ground defined by clear-cut reproductive capacities".²⁸

3). Third Wave Feminism and the "Post Natural" Body

Partly in response to the postmodern deconstruction of second wave feminist terms, especially as pertains to "the body," in the late 1980s and early 1990s "third wave" feminism emerged. Critiquing the universal woman and feminist activism's attachment to a naturalized body, third-wave feminists posit a body that embraces, to varying degrees, postmodern conceptions of the subject, power, and embodiment. The third wave "body" attempts to break down Cartesian dualism through a more radical constructivism that renders "natural" sex and "cultural" gender inseparable. In fact, however, patriarchal dualism is reasserted in a social overdeterminism of the body²⁹ as the new material feminists also claim.

Like postmodernism, what is captured in the term "third-wave feminism" is hard to delineate. To some it is a tendency shared by several feminisms which seeks to transcend the second wave neglect of differences among women, which results from prioritizing differences between women and men. Its effects are not limited to those feminists who consider themselves part of the third wave rather than the second, however, since it destabilizes concepts held by both. I agree with Arneil that third wave feminism is best understood as an "evolution in feminist thought generally, as it grapples towards particular, embodied, women's perspective(s)." ³⁰ The third wave preoccupation with difference, however, often translates into dismissal of the features of the modern body such as sex/gender, most featured in biological determinist arguments, and on which politically relevant commonalities among women are based. I think the third wave is a general reorientation within the women's movement rather than a quantifiable framework, but that some distinguishing features can be identified, most importantly the "post-natural body."

Most third wave feminists posit versions of a "post-natural body" to upend biological determinism based on modern notions of essential subjectivity. This body is "post-natural" in that it is not determined by its genes, nor its social mores, but by a more complex interaction between the two. Nature does not determine its features, nor does the social context – but the materiality of the body does fade in this analysis. Illustrating this disembodied tendency within feminism, Susan Stryker argues that the "post-natural' body" is definitive of the third wave of feminism.³¹ As one keynote speaker at Exeter's Third Wave Feminism conference, Stryker highlights the centrality of embodied difference to the newest feminisms. In an interview reflecting on the conference she makes the cautionary statement that "to the extent that feminism fails to address emerging complexities of identities, roles and bodies, it will fail to be a relevant social

²⁸ Tina Chanter, "Postmodern subjectivity," in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 266.

²⁹ See for example, Kath and Sophie Woodward, *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 65, 158; Howson, *embodying gender*, and Lynda Birke, *Feminism and the Biological Body*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

³¹ Stryker, "A Conversation with Susan Stryker," 122.

movement.”³² While this seems a perfectly pedestrian and agreeable statement, the dispersed focus of feminism has been effected and it’s not all good.³³ Stryker’s specific interest is in the “kind of difference represented by transsexuals,” which she claims is “a precursor to a whole range of issues around biomedical technology and the ‘post-natural’ body.”³⁴ The thorny gender categorizations raised by the issue of Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), a topic of fellow keynote speaker Germaine Greer’s discussion, is particularly illuminating of the status of the “natural” body in the third wave. AIS is a condition which prevents some genetically “male” bodies from metabolizing testosterone, and thus from developing male genital structure. Greer’s insistence on calling those with AIS “men” leads to Stryker’s observation that she “seems not to recognize that the relationships between sexed embodiment, social role and psychological identity are very complex, and that there are more than two paths to gendered personhood”.³⁵ In the interview, this key second wave feminist figure’s “‘chromosomal fundamentalism,’ a belief that X and Y chromosomes determine who is a man and who is a woman ...”³⁶ is made to exemplify the serious shortcomings of the second wave.

In the early twenty-first century, difference feminisms continue to emerge, buttressed by new conceptions of the body and feminism and influenced to varying degrees by postmodern theory.³⁷ This new category of feminism recognizes and balances material, biological bodies with the ideological, discursively constituted body of postmodern theory. But not all methods are equally valid in changing the pernicious mind/body dualism. Many simply posit, even unwittingly, a form of biological determinism or more likely, cultural essentialism. The question of consequence becomes: what position and value does the materiality of the body (sex and “nature”) hold in the new difference feminisms?

Feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway is at the intersection of the modern to postmodern turn (hence of these debates). This theorist is widely presented as at the forefront of the shift from modernist to postmodernist practices in feminism with her famous “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985). Newman and White are representative when they consider Haraway’s manifesto as marking a paradigm shift in feminist practice from a focus on women as agential self-directed subjects of feminist politics, to querying women’s subjectivity as constitutive of power that can be counterproductive to feminist aims. Somewhat confusingly, she is also sometimes considered the grandmother of the material turn as well. Some new material feminism’s prominent positioning of Haraway,

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

³³ See Linda Hirshman, “Looking to the Future, Feminism Has to Focus,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/06/AR2008060603494.html>, and Raewyn Connell’s preface in Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart (eds.), *Re-Thinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender, Violence in International Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁷ See, for example, the range of thinkers in Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms* including Elizabeth Grosz, Karan Barad, Donna Haraway, and Nancy Tuana, and the “post positivist realist” theories of identity in Hames-Garcia and Moya 2000.

in spite of the difficulty in ideologically placing her, is indicative of the kind of respect of conceptual and methodological complexity the material turn presents the opportunity for.

4). **Reconsidering Donna Haraway**

In response to the challenge of essentialism in feminism theories of the *in-between*, variously influenced by postmodern theory, have proliferated. These theories attempt to subvert the subject/object, mind/body, man/woman dualism by rejecting a “well-worn” *either/or* mentality. Tina Chanter, for example, in explaining “postmodern subjectivity” expresses her opposition to the “two unhealthy visions” that result from Cartesian mind/body dualism: “On the one hand there is the ideal disembodied, transcendental subject who enjoys a ‘view from nowhere’ – with its pretensions to objectivity, neutrality, and universality. On the other hand the subject is seen as a passive puppet whose strings are pulled by any number of forces outside its control – biology, society, and the state become interchangeable placeholders for some form of determinism.”³⁸

Donna Haraway rose to the challenge by presenting the concept of “situated knowledges” which attempt to bridge the gulf between female sexed and reproductive bodies and women’s multiple experiences of them. The difference between such theories and the old essentialism is in the idea of a new “nomadic” subject described as “the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference and others.”³⁹ The most obvious of these might be Haraway’s famous and controversial cyborg figure (1985) which presents a version of complex feminist embodiment,⁴⁰ but I argue the work most significant for its ground-breaking potential is “Situated Knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective,” where she argues for a feminist objectivity constituted of partial position.⁴¹ It’s here that her hopes to keep hold of both the objectivity aspirations of feminism (at that point) and the undeniable uncertainty of the traditional grounds for them was made clear. By contrast, while “A Cyborg Manifesto” revolutionized feminist theory and practice, it also produced (like for Butler) what she herself did not intend; it was taken up in such a way that it fed into the linguistic/constructionist turn in feminism with not altogether beneficial consequences for the movement⁴² as I will explore.

The significance of Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges” is its direct attention to the dilemmas postmodernist theory posed to feminism in undoing the universal “woman.” Haraway’s answer to the constitutive dangers of false objectivity in feminist theory is that “...only partial perspective promises objective vision” which entails methodological and conceptual wisdom re-emergent in the new material feminisms. She writes: “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and

³⁸ Chanter, “Postmodern subjectivity,” 264.

³⁹ Thornham, “Postmodernism and Feminism,” 50-1.

⁴⁰ See Asberg “Enter Cyborg.”

⁴¹ See Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism.”

⁴² See Susan Hekman, in *Material Feminisms*, Alaimo, Stacy and Susan Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 86-87 and Cecilia Asberg “Enter cyborg: tracing the historiography and ontological turn of feminist technoscience studies” *International Journal of Feminist Technoscience*, 1:1, 2010, 19.

splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.”⁴³

Conceptually, she reconfigures sex / gender, or “feminist critical empiricism versus radical constructionism” in recognition of the failure of bi-polar structures for any successful new feminist work. She critiques biological determinism (as a mark of postmodernist antiessentialism) and yet writes, “to lose authoritative biological accounts of sex, which set up productive tensions with gender, seems to be to lose too much; it seems to be to lose not just analytic power within a particular Western tradition but also the body itself as anything but a blank page for social inscriptions... ”⁴⁴ Haraway’s settlement is seeing the subjects as “material-semiotic”⁴⁵ actors, which holds both ends of the pole in view but still subverts the dualistic metaphor.

In “Situated Knowledges” Haraway descriptively prefigures what she exemplifies in her manifesto. One cannot fault her for being an example of her theory; she has multiple voices and positions regarding the nature question in feminism, which means her significance and impact has been correspondingly multiple. At her best, Haraway’s theorization of embodiment is about the overlaps and intersections of nature/culture, human/machine, and animal/human, which are never fixed or stable.

Haraway introduced the cyborg in her pathbreaking “A Cyborg Manifesto” first published in 1985.⁴⁶ The word conflates “cybernetic and organism” and was coined by NASA research space scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in 1960⁴⁷ in the context of the cold war “space race”. This is why Haraway calls it the “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism,”⁴⁸ signifying its outlaw status, meaning outside the norm hence unthinkable, or “monstrous,” but also free to self-define. To grasp Haraway’s metaphor, one must first understand cybernetics as “the study of the operation of control and communication systems”⁴⁹ applied to both biological organisms and mechanical systems. The cyborg image stresses the intimacy between organism and machine as an “integrated circuit,” an information network unhindered by boundaries and specifically the dualisms of Western enlightenment narratives. Haraway posits a post-human figure for feminists to embrace as a metaphor for the discursive material realities of being in a technological age. Human here is defined by a self-contained body distinguished from its context of techno-cultural fields. On the verge of postmodern epistemology’s rise in feminism, she tells us the “self feminists must code” has

⁴³ Donna Haraway. “Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 183-201, 583.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 591.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 595.

⁴⁶ Donna Haraway, “A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth-century” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴⁷ Manfred E Clynes & Nathan S. Kline (1960/1995) September 1960 in *The Cyborg Handbook* (eds. Chris Hables Gray, Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera and Steven Montor (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 29-34.

⁴⁸ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 151.

⁴⁹ Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary, 238.

changed into the cyborg, “ a kind of disassembled and reassembled personal self” not easily linked to a biological body.⁵⁰

Her primary purpose in the manifesto is to present a fatal challenge to the sacred boundaries of modern (scientific) thought including the clean distinctions between machine/organism, culture/nature, man/woman, and also representational/real and in so doing presents “an ironic political myth” for a “post-gender world.”⁵¹ For Haraway, no simplistic, homogeneous, and naturalized notion of woman (as the mirror image of technological man) is realistic or adequate for the postmodern paradoxes feminists embody in a high technological age.⁵²

One key purpose of Haraway’s cyborg is to debunk the myth of the “natural” woman opposing “technological” man, rife in normative culture and ecofeminist (and other narratives) alike when she was writing. Her work’s significance here is its clear statement of desire to cross boundaries while maintaining (feminist) politics even as it complicates the possibility for feminist identity. She explains: “...to recognize ‘oneself’ as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identification, vanguard parties, purity, and mothering.”⁵³ Women and cyborgs are hybrids, “non-innocent monsters” implicated in the creation of new “worlds” for better and worse. This is as much a statement about Haraway’s postmodern conception of power as it is about the place of women within it. Like Foucault, she focuses on a new way of understanding power as dispersed, the network or “informatics of domination” which replaces (but remains a part of) “white capitalist patriarchy”⁵⁴ rather than as a master-slave-type hierarchy.

Haraway’s manifesto is an abstract pronouncement rather than advocacy for any literal masculine terminator or sexy fem-bot. The sex/gender of the cyborg isn’t her point⁵⁵. Like Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, with which this text shares postmodern themes and consequences, “A Cyborg Manifesto” is Haraway’s most famous and controversial work and took on a central significance to the high stakes constructionist/essentialist division in feminism that the new material feminisms address and is my topic.⁵⁶

As an intended consequence of her approach, Haraway’s work is resistant to straightforward categorization by reference to any one ideological foundation. “[N]one of Donna Haraway’s publications can easily be said to fit neither social constructivist nor naturalist takes on biology.”⁵⁷ This is certainly true of her corpus but may also be the case within “A Cyborg Manifesto” where politicization and imagination casually comeingle. In

⁵⁰ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 163.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

⁵² Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 163.

⁵³ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, 176.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁵ See Asberg, “Enter cyborg,” 15-16, and Sunden, “What happened to Difference in Cyberspace?” regarding Haraway’s ungendered cyborg.

⁵⁶ There is scholarly disagreement about Haraway’s positioning as a postmodern theorist. See Kolmar and Bartkowski (Eds). *Feminist theory: A reader* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000) which presents her work as bringing about the shift in feminist from modernist to postmodernist foundations, and Nina Lykke’s, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism” and Asberg, 19-20 which complicate a simple characterization of her work as situated in either one or the other category. For contrast with previous work, “Situated Knowledges”, see chapter 3.

⁵⁷ Asberg, 17.

either case, her multivocality shouldn't be unexpected given her advocacy of partial perspectives as the new (feminist) objectivity in the earlier "Situated Knowledges". Haraway's cyborg can be seen as merely one demonstration of such situated knowledges and partial perspectives, a point supported by her presentation of a number of other such figures (like the coyote, trickster, oncomouse etc).⁵⁸ The cyborg then, was a historically specific, provocative tool for new thinking. My critique is that in undermining key dualisms she not only creatively resituates historically subjugated knowledges, but helps to effect the depoliticization and dis-integration of the material body and so, of the grounds for feminism. As Lynda Birke also recognized, since the emphasis is placed on the body's coextension with the rest of the world in an open network of information flow, its bounded internal features – its integrity, in a word -- is what's lost. "Information flows are all, and we thereby lose any sense of the organism itself."⁵⁹

Though it is easy to understand Haraway's motivation to replace patriarchal dichotomies so inadequate to the task of representing the complexity of women's existence, how this new space can support political agency involving embodied actors remains open ended as a matter of principle. Manifestos are, by their very definition, playful, passionate and imaginative tools for new paradigms of thought and, in this case, about politics consciously devoid of normative origin myths. As for other postmodern theorists, imagining, and the use of language are powerful, even "deadly serious" (political) acts as she emphasizes.⁶⁰

With the advantage of hindsight "A Cyborg Manifesto" marks the shift from modern to postmodern foundations in feminist thought with all of its associated benefits and disadvantages⁶¹. Haraway echoes Butler's antiessentialism in writing: "There is nothing about being female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices."⁶² If, as Cecilia Asberg aptly summarized, "In a sense, imagination is reality production in process"⁶³ in Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" this proved a double edged sword. As for Butler, Haraway's intentions were subverted, perhaps, in the effects she produced. As Birke aptly argues, "Haraway is... too easily read in ways that lose the materiality of the organism. It is not only discourses... that construct my boundaries, but also the various cells that are busily making and remaking my tissues."⁶⁴

Haraway's point in "A Cyborg Manifesto" is outside the question of gender difference versus sex, that is, outside the binary metastructures of thought that are as damaging as unaccountable. To pick on details seems to lose the greater significance of her work's aptly recognized place in the history of feminist science studies. Also, her scholarship has changed over time. My point here is that Haraway's wish that cyborg

⁵⁸ See Asberg, 19.

⁵⁹ Lynda Birke. *Feminism and the Biological Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 144.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶¹ Kolmar and Bartkowski, *Feminist Theory: A Reader*.

⁶² Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 155.

⁶³ Asberg, "Enter Cyborg," 14.

⁶⁴ Birke, *Feminism and the Biological Body*, 144-145, especially reference to Susan Wendell on 145.

feminism would be “more able to remain attuned to specific historical and political positionings and permanent partialities *without abandoning the search for potent connections*” remains unfulfilled.⁶⁵ The recent proliferation of writing on the new material feminisms that are concerned with the feminist turn “to discourse at the expense of the material” attests to this both explicitly and implicitly.⁶⁶ Haraway herself remains on task in this turn. In *Material Feminisms*, Hekman and Alaimo credit her with keeping a grasp of matter without losing the analytical depth of social constructionism in discussing her concept of the ‘material-discursive,’ which refuses to separate the two”⁶⁷

Lykke provides the best example of how to reclaim postmodernism, highlighting the limitations of such labels, particularly regarding Donna Haraway. Asberg does the same in suggesting Haraway’s cyborg prefigured the material turn. Situating the thought of this significant feminist thinker is to effectively take us beyond the *feminism as between modernity and postmodernity* debate. While paying homage to Sandra Harding’s “classic tripartite classification of feminist epistemology” (133) published in 1986, Lykke argues that its hegemonic uptake in feminist studies “...is obscuring that the unfolding of synergies between feminist and post-modernist thought has taken a diversity of routes and sometimes gone beyond post-modernist anti-foundationalism.” This approach enables an understanding of why Haraway fits nowhere (or in multiple places at once), and a more realistic framework of categorization generally.

5). “Breaking Feminist Waves”

One of the best contemporary feminist insights associated with the material turn is the need to subvert the presentation of feminism as adequately captured in a waves analogy, especially as it positions modern, second wave feminisms in conflict with postmodern third wave feminisms⁶⁸. Linda Alcoff and Gillian Howie, Zalewski, Kath and Sophie Woodward (and others) mitigate the feminism trapped between modernity and postmodernity by critiquing, and offering an alternative to, the waves metaphor. For example, Alcoff and Howie critique that such presentation sets up a chronological and teleological view of feminist theory that tends to work against positive frames for new work.⁶⁹ Furthermore, I agree with Howie in her assessment that, “Dialogue between liberal feminists, radical, Marxist, and postmodernist feminists will enable [feminists] to organize around problems as they emerge and impact on diverse situations: breathing life into feminist activism and hauling activism back into the academy.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 1, my emphasis.

⁶⁶ See especially Susan Hekman, in *Material Feminisms*, Alaimo, Stacy and Susan Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 86-87.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁸ See Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward, and especially Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism: Theorising through practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶⁹ “Breaking Feminist Waves” Series Foreword, vii.

⁷⁰ Howie, Gillian. *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 205.

This new thinking about representing feminism is an integral part of its renaissance because it makes possible attempts to fully access and reclaim diverse feminist theories without regard to disputes, whether they characterized as generational or ideological, or other intellectual blind spots. It signals an incorporation into feminist theory of the essence of the third wave critique that second wave feminism had an undue and non-innocent fixation on sameness that imposed homogeneity where heterogeneity existed. “Breaking feminist waves” seems a natural outgrowth of difference feminism and diversity battles within feminism arising around the linguistic turn. In these new iterations it comes across that there is a coherence to the generational divisions, but that they shouldn’t be misinterpreted as homogenous slices of history.⁷¹ A further consequence of this approach emphasizes the ideological complexity of any wave of feminism making room for creative combinations as Kath and Sophie Woodward exemplify. At the same time, it also enables a robust and mature focus on commonalities as Gillian Howie illustrates.

Alcoff and Howie pointedly elaborate the critique of feminist waves representation in the foreword to the “Breaking Feminist Waves” Palgrave Macmillan series. They outline the way the waves imagery “constrains,” simplifies and “restricts” the way we think about and do feminism (in the past, present and future) by implying “a singular trajectory with an inevitably progressive teleology.”⁷² They posit a more nuanced and accurate view of feminisms, placing emphasis on diversity. “The generational division ... cannot represent the dominant divide within feminism, nor a division between essentially coherent moments; there are always multiple conflicts and contradictions, as well as differences about the goals, strategies, founding concepts, and starting premises.”⁷³

Another important way the cross-feminist waves way of looking at ideas and feminist practices holds possibility for a renewed feminism is the recognition of not just differences among women in a spatio-temporal sense, but also similarities. Howie puts this best by deeply reconsidering and rearticulating the notion that internationalism must present a stumbling block to feminism. She resituates feminism: “The recognition that dwelling exceeds spatial relations, that place is a function of the social imaginary constituted through competing interests, and that the particular is fastened within a global network of relations, alliances, and movements provides momentum to coalitional feminism. She sophisticates the view of space and time as intersecting and overlapping in stating “... The relationship between the local and the global is not to be defined in terms of geography or territory but as existing simultaneously and mutually constitutive.”⁷⁴ Howie’s argument for a feminist revisitation of materialism culminates in the conclusion that to answer the old structure and agency debate, *either/or* frameworks will not do. She writes: “... to form political alliances we need to account for located situated knowledge and to map the systematic nature of interests: we need both a respect for differences and to know which differences are relevant.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ See Alcoff and Howie, *Breaking Feminist Waves* “Series Foreword;” Kath and Sophie Woodward, *Why Feminism Matters*; and Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism*.

⁷² “Breaking Feminist Waves” Series Foreword, vii.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁷⁴ Howie, *Between Feminism and Materialism*, 203.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

Key among the theorists constituting the new methodological paradigm is Marysia Zalewski in *Feminism after postmodernism* which systematically investigates the “alleged gulf”⁷⁶ between modernist and postmodernist feminisms, both theoretically and by applying each purported approach to dilemmas surrounding new reproductive technologies. She ultimately questions “the idea of a progressive chronology” and “that there is *one* modernist or *one* postmodernist feminist story about anything.”⁷⁷

Zalewski helpfully positions herself as a mediator between two sides of a stalemate situation. Her purpose is a practical one, addressed to the presentation of more traditional feminisms as anachronistic and feminism’s quietude over the last few decades because of its imbrication in the essentialist / constructionist logghead. She effectively illustrates the convergences as well as the divergences of the radical, liberal, and Marxist (modernist) feminisms with the psychoanalytic (postmodernist) ones – which breaks down the hardened view of two opposing, chronological camps. Her approach also demonstrates how particular material issues, like reproduction, can help revive feminist activism. The subtle message is that these radically opposed differences are theoretically articulated and enacted, but in practice they lose (much) of their significance.

Most significantly and like Howie, Zalewski clarifies that neither modernist nor postmodernist feminisms are accurately nor usefully explained in this absolutist *either/or* framework. That is, feminism is neither modern nor postmodern, but encompasses a range of approaches and is between the two poles (somewhere in the supposed “gulf”?) Furthermore, this placement is creative, and productive in keeping with the analogy. She writes, “...there is a profound ambiguity in feminism: it challenges modernist epistemology but is located in the emancipatory impulses of modernism. So in a sense *all* feminisms are in an anomalous position vis-à-vis the modernist/postmodernist debate. The idea of a gulf seems inadequate to capture this intriguing ambiguity. Instead it encourages a policing and disciplining set of strategies.”⁷⁸

Nina Lykke’s sophisticated theorization of the new material feminisms as post-constructionism similarly subverts linear temporality and its controversial conceptual implications, most clearly in refusing the prefix “new.” She explains: “Constructionist and post-constructionist feminist ways of theorizing are, as I see it, running in parallel.”⁷⁹ Asberg takes this a step further in “Enter Cyborg” where she attributes the material turn of topic to Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” showing “how the figure of the cyborg in fact might be positioned as the first sign materializing and anticipating what we today might call the ontological turn within feminist theory and technoscience studies.”⁸⁰ Elsewhere Asberg and Lykke together assign credit for “our recent attraction to the study

⁷⁶ Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷⁹ Lykke, Nina. “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism” *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 18, 2 (June 2010), 131-136, 133.

⁸⁰ Asberg, “Enter Cyborg,” 1. See also page 2 where she argues that “the emerging discourse that, often sloppily, is referred to as the material turn (as if materialisms were new phenomena in the humanist imagination.)”

of things physical, or what has sometimes been called the new material turn” to feminist technoscience studies.⁸¹

Instead her “post-constructionism” indicates continuities and discontinuities with de/constructionist feminisms that prevents simplified and misleading characterizations. Significantly, Lykke highlights how post-constructionism is not a simple turning away from previous theory but a positive and progressive negotiation. She emphasizes that its central feature is “The double move of going into and beyond post-modern epistemological thought and constructionist understandings of science ...” rather than “sticking to Harding’s ore simple taxonomy, ‘post-modern feminist epistemology.’”⁸²

As mother and daughter feminist scholars co-writing *Why Feminism Matters*, Kath and Sophie Woodward demonstrate how this cross-generational relationship and discussion works (as a dialogue and dialectic) as an analogy for the feminist theories that go into each wave. “We have held on to the idea of the dialectic throughout as it constructs a sense that feminist ideas can move forward and across intersecting fields in a process that challenges linearity so that we are also not stuck in an oppositional impasse.”⁸³ They do so, originally, by negotiating every word rather than contributing separate chapters of the book in an effort to get beyond the notion of clear generational disconnects or “rupture” that can be the effect of the waves metaphor. In particular they challenge “... the idea that feminist history is either a teleological development where the past once built upon is no longer useful in the present... .”⁸⁴ Their methodology is teamed with a powerful argument for a re-politicized feminism.

In constructing an argument for why feminism still matters in the twenty-first century, theirs is a purposive and political approach. “...our aim is to explore the impact, not only of markets but of feminist theoretical developments on what could be seen as the disarticulation of feminism and the dissociation of theory, form, practice and lived experience... .”⁸⁵ They ultimately call for a new feminist politics of difference in a “reversioned standpoint epistemology which focuses on the specificities of gendered situations.”⁸⁶ One that brings back into circulation feminism’s best arguments and theories some of which have been, until the latest turn, casualties of changing intellectual fashion.

⁸¹ Asberg, Cecilia and Nina Lykke, “Feminist technoscience studies” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 17:4 (2010) 299-305, 300-301.

⁸² Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism,” 134 and 133, respectively.

⁸³ Kath and Sophie Woodward, *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 164.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁶ Kath and Sophie Woodward, *Why Feminism Matters*, 170. See also Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “‘Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept’” *Hypatia* 26:3 (Summer, 2011), and Gillian Howie, *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 205

where each call for a version of standpoint feminism via a self-consciously situated theory. See, Haraway in “Situated Knowledges” where she calls for a feminist objectivity that recognizes partial perspective.

6). Conclusion

In essence, the new materialists argue, as I do that bodies are material; i.e. products of complex biosocial processes which are not reducible to any of its elements; they are neither simply nor primarily a biological fact, nor are they purely socially constructed artifacts. Meanings are attributed to bodies, and bodies come to reflect those meanings even genetically and in our bones as Fausto-Sterling reveals. That the meaning of biology is politically and culturally mediated is a cornerstone feminist insight richly and variously explained by scholars in the interdisciplinary field of feminist (techno)science studies since the 1970s⁸⁷. But we know from at least as early as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that biological bodies are cultural and historical entities in process; i.e. gendered bodies (men's and women's physiques) are at least partly determined by specific patriarchal ideologies which inform our activities and lifestyles as men and women.

The sort of rigid biology / society binary that has been a significant feature of feminist discourse until now has limited an adequate or realistic understanding of women's lives. Anne Phillips states: "the variety of women's interests does not refute the claim that interests are gendered. That some women do not bear children does not make pregnancy a gender neutral event."⁸⁸ I would suggest also that seeing sex/gender as socially constructed does not mean that it is not also biological. Furthermore, because of women's rightly apprehensive engagement with all things biological because of their historic association with "nature," feminism's actual engagement with the biological body outside of a reductive Cartesian framework has been limited⁸⁹. However, like post-constructionists, I argue that without refocusing on material rather than abstract forms of embodiment, feminism will remain at an ultimately unproductive (biological) essentialist versus (social) constructionist impasse at the foundation of the most difficult feminist issues. Biology, understood as historical and cultural process *and* materially grounded, can be reclaimed for feminism. In spite of biological determinism built on a false belief in natural bodies as passive matter, Birke aptly shows how "biological knowledge can be a feminist ally" (415).

In many significant respects the new material feminisms represent the most promising feminist approach to the ontological and epistemological questions at the heart of feminism. In specific, as diverse and emergent theories critical of constructivist neglect of the material aspects of embodied existence, they constitute a methodological approach that has the greater consequence of "breaking feminist waves" hence taking us beyond the impassable social constructionist / biological essentialist narrative that is associated with postmodernist and modernist theories respectively.

These new material feminisms enable an incorporation of the diversity of women's individual embodied sex/gender experiences, while still accounting for the corporeal commonalities women share. This has positive implications for a theory of reproductive justice, for example. They also reignite recurring debates about feminism's (perhaps exaggerated but nonetheless real) theoretical and practical differences. In

⁸⁷ For an excellent historiography of feminist technoscience studies see Cecilia Asberg, "Enter Cyborg: tracing the historiography and ontological turn of feminist technoscience studies," *International Journal of Feminist Technoscience*, 1,1(2010).

⁸⁸ Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 68.

⁸⁹ Cecilia Asberg and Lynda Birke, "Biology is a feminist issue: Interview with Lynda Birke", 414.

particular they are a potentially fruitful ground for the working out of the biosocial dialectic within feminism, and specifically in feminist technoscience studies, but also more broadly between the natural sciences and social sciences. Birke, Asberg, and Lykke (among others) have argued for a better relationship between feminism and science, including between those who do (techno)science studies and more traditional human studies within feminist theory.

Contradictions are a necessary part of learning, of history and the momentum of embodied life itself, and shouldn't be interpreted as evidence of feminism's fracture into incommensurable ideological factions (whether presented in linear chronology or simultaneous), hence its final undoing. It's important not to shy away from theorists who undo tidy categories of analysis; in fact, this is what's needed to update and advance feminist thinking. Most simply, "feminism [is] not a rulebook but a discussion, a conversation, a process."⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Tavi Gevenson, "Still Figuring it Out" TedxTeen Talk, March 31, 2012. <http://tedxteen.com/talks/tedxteen-2012/112-tavi-gevinson-still-figuring-it-out>. (Accessed April 29, 2012).

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